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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

4 November 1980

MEMORANDUM

MOROCCO: RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Internal Scene

Morocco's King Hassan dominates the secular and religious life of his country. He is skillful at balancing competing factions and at exploiting their differences to protect his preeminent position. As a result, there are no self-sustaining political institutions or interest groups that seriously restrict his ability to make all major policy decisions.

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The King nevertheless does have a vocal and troublesome civilian opposition. Earlier this year, popular grumbling about Morocco's growing economic and social problems was increasing, and Hassan faced the prospect of unrest from trade unionists, students, and Islamic fundamentalists. Arrests and preventative detentions of the leading activists, while they cowed organizers and prevented incidents, seemed only to build popular resentment and to give Hassan's opponents--especially the socialist political party--new grist with which to attack him.

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Over the past few months, Hassan has made a number of unexpected moves that have helped to defuse the arguments of the King's political opponents. In July and August, Hassan pardoned a number of "political prisoners"--some had been in jail for many years--whose cases had become a cause celebre of Moroccan and European human rights groups. The releases included virtually all of Hassan's important socialist opposition.

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At the same time, Hassan amnestied many oppositionists in exile and encouraged them to return home. He reinstated with back pay a number of labor activists who lost their jobs during strikes in the spring of 1979. The King also announced a series of economic measures intended to benefit low-income citizens, such as rent reductions and special tax measures. [redacted]

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These actions have further fragmented Hassan's opposition, and helped to foster the image of an active monarch concerned with the public's welfare. As a result, the possibility of incidents is significantly reduced, and the King seems in his best political shape in the past few years. [redacted]

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Foreign Affairs

Morocco's consuming foreign policy problem is of course the war against the Algerian- and Libyan-backed Polisario Front guerrillas who are fighting for the independence of Western Sahara. Since early this year, when Moroccan forces were suffering serious defeats from guerrilla attacks inside Morocco proper, Rabat has improved its military position and is inflicting substantial losses on the Polisario. Neither side effectively controls much of the territory, however, and neither is likely to achieve a military victory anytime soon. [redacted]

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Diplomatic efforts to encourage a political solution to the war--mediation by a special committee of the Organization for African Unity and by interested third parties--appear to be making little headway. The climate for negotiations may be improving, however, as Morocco and Algeria both seem increasingly interested in ending the war. Much of the Moroccan public nevertheless reportedly remains opposed to "giving up" too much to the guerrillas, and we have also seen no indication that the Polisario is moderating its demands for full independence for the territory. [redacted]

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On other international questions, Rabat continues its professedly nonaligned but generally pro-Western stance. Hassan is deeply suspicious of Soviet intentions in the Middle East and especially in Africa. He has been publicly vocal in his condemnations of Soviet policy in the region, and he blames the US for failing to take decisive action to check what Morocco regards as Moscow's advances there.

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Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Hassan decided to slow the pace of Morocco's burgeoning economic contacts with the USSR--especially the large Meskala phosphate project. [redacted]

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As chairman of the Jerusalem Committee of the Islamic Conference, Hassan exercises a moderating influence on regional issues in concert with other like-minded states such as Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. Morocco still maintains privately its longstanding close ties with Egypt despite Rabat's reluctant rejection of the Camp David peace process and the criticism to which these ties expose Morocco from hardline states. [redacted]

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